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SUBJECT: MUTED SOVIET REACTION TO MANDELA'S RELEASE

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. FOR ALL THE ATTENTION THE SOVIET MEDIA HAVE PAID TO NELSON MANDELA'S RELEASE FEBRUARY 12, HE MIGHT AS WELL STILL BE IN PRISON. "SEVEN DAYS", THE USSR'S MAJOR SUNDAY EVENING NEWS AND WEEK-IN-REVIEW PROGRAM, DEVOTED ALL OF THIRTY SECONDS TO THE EVENT, AND BURIED IT SOME FORTY MINUTES INTO THE PROGRAM -- AFTER SUCH HIGHLIGHTS AS UPCOMING LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SVERDLOVSK. "PRAVDA" (FEB. 12) LIKEWISE DEVOTED SCANT COVERAGE TO THE RELEASE, AND CARRIED ONLY A BIO SKETCH OF MANDELA, NEXT TO THE FAMILIAR 27-YEAR OLD PHOTO OF THE ANC LEADER WHEN HE WAS JAILED.

13. AT A PRESS CONFERENCE IN MOSCOW FEBRUARY 12, FIRST DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER YULIY VORONTSOV WAS ASKED ABOUT MANDELA'S RELEASE AND WHETHER THIS WOULD PROMPT THE USSR TO RESTORE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICA. VORONTSOV RESPONDED THAT THE SOVIET UNION WELCOMED MANDELA'S RELEASE BY THE SAG. "IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER IF HE HAD NOT BEEN IMPRISONED FOR 27 YEARS," VORONTSOV SAID IN THE ONLY FORCEFUL COMMENT WE HAVE HEARD ON THIS SUBJECT. MANDELA'S RELEASE DID NOT YET MEAN THE SAG HAD DISMANTLED APARTHEID, HOWEVER. UNTIL THIS OCCURRED, THE WHOLE CIVILIZED WORLD -- INCLUDING THE USSR -- WOULD REFUSE TO HAVE NORMAL RELATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICA, VORONTSOV SAID.

14. THE SINCERITY OF VORONTSOV'S COMMENTS WAS UNDERMINED BY THE FACT THAT THE QUESTION WAS OBVIOUSLY "PLANTED." THE PRESS CONFERENCE HAD BEEN CALLED TO DISCUSS AN ENTIRELY SEPARATE SUBJECT RELATING TO THE MIDDLE EAST. THE PERSON WHO ASKED THE QUESTION -- RADIO MOSCOW AFRICA SERVICE OFFICIAL ALEKSEY BATOGOV -- WAS CLEARLY BEWILDERED BY HIS PRESENCE THERE AND EVEN ASKED AN EMBOFF IN ATTENDANCE WHAT THE PROCEDURE WAS FOR POSING QUESTIONS.

15. IF THIS RELATIVE LACK OF ATTENTION TO AN HISTORIC EVENT HAS SURPRISED US, IT HAS NO DOUBT INFURIATED SOME AFRICAN DIPLOMATS. NEVERTHELESS, THIS TREATMENT CONFIRMS THE LOW PRIORITY WHICH AFRICAN AFFAIRS OCCUPIES IN A SOVIET SOCIETY WHICH IS ABSORBED IN DOMESTIC ISSUES. MATLOCK

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